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ABSTRACT

Hypothesizing that news stories written about a female source would have more personal and feminine information than stories written about a male source, even if all the information available to the reporter were identical, a study varied gender of source with male and female college student reporters randomly assigned to the male-source and female-source conditions. The subjects were given a packet containing a press conference transcript, a biography, and a copy of a page of handwritten reporter's notes and told to write an article based only on the materials they were given. A 2 x 2 independent measure factorial design was used to analyze student reporters' use of personal versus professional information as well as masculine, feminine, and neutral information in their news stories. The findings showed a main effect for the source-gender variable with the female sources described in news stories with more personal and less professional information than the male source. No main effects for reporter gender were found. (Author/HOD)

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The Effect of Gender of Source and Reporter on News Coverage

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ABSTRACT

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Gender of source was varied with male and female student reporters randomly assigned to the male-source and female-source conditions. The 2 by 2 independent measures factorial design was used to analyze student reporters' use of personal versus professional information as well as masculine, feminine and neutral information in their news stories. The study hypothesized that female sources would be described more often with personal information and feminine-oriented information than males sources. It was further hypothesized that female reporters would use personal information more often than male reporters. The findings showed a main effect for the source gender variable with the female source described in news stories with more personal and fewer professional information than the male source. No main effects for reporter gender were found. Results were discussed within the framework of stereotyping among both male and female reporters, implications for the newsroom and journalism education.

The press has carefully chronicled, with increasing interest, the progress of the feminist movement in the past twenty years. The struggle for the ERA has brought gender inequalities into the public areana. Clearly, strides are being made in business and government, two institutions notable for resistance to change. But what of the press itself? How do women fare in relation to men when press coverage is examined? Studies in the form of gatekeeper surveys and content analyses have noted how gender sterotypes affect the finished copy of news stories. With these studies as background, we decided to test news writing students to see how they would treat identical information concerning a source who for half of the writers was female and for the other half male.

For instance, Davis[1] content analyzed a national sample of newspapers to assess sex bias in both mechancial (placement, size, etc.) and mainfest (hard vs. soft news, physical descriptions) content. She found a correlation between gender of the main character in the news stories and headlines, size and placement of the articles, with stories about women being shorter and characterized by smaller headlines than stories about men. Men were more likely to be main characters in front page stories and were also more likely to be writers of front page stories.

Davis also found that descriptions of women were more likely to contain personal information, such as attire and marital status, than were descrip-

tions of men.

These results complement findings of Forsit et al.[2] who found similar sex bias in news stories about women. Their study showed that coverage of women was more likely to include mention of personal appearance, marital status and spouse than news stories about men.

If news coverage of women retains much of the traditional sterotypes, one may question whether there is an institutional bias in newspaper staff attitudes which perpetuates such an incomplete picture of women. Examining attitudes of male and female gatekeepers toward news stories about women, Whitlow[3] found that for some of these gatekeepers, conflicts between their perceptions of the proper role of women in society and how to treat news coverage of women were often resolved at women's expense. Resolution sometimes occurred through rejection of the news item or through diminished coverage, including smaller headlines, shorter stories, or trivialization of the story. These gatekeepers were also likely to assign certain characteristics, such as insecurity and concern for appearance, to women. Others went so far as to reject outright stories with female news prinicpals, and some showed concern over any story which departed from role stereotypes for both sexes.

Institutions and gatekeepers notwithstanding, what of the typical reporter? Is he or she likely to participate, wittingly or unwittingly, in the perpetuation of gender stereotypes when writing a news story, or is objectivity likely to prevail? In a general study comparing reporters' attitudes toward a source and the degree of balance in a resulting news story, Kerrick, Anderson and Swales[4] found that reporters tended to use more statements con-

sistent with the theme of a given story, even if their personal opinions ran counter to the theme. Similarly, Drew[5] found that reporters' attitudes toward a news source seemed to have little bearing on the news stories they produced. At first glance certain elements of the Whitlow and Drew studies would seem to be at odds. On the one hand, there is evidence of gender bias at various levels of the newspaper staff, while on the other, there appears to be a successful effort on the part of journalists to subordinate their personal attitudes to a concern for objectivity.

This apparent contradiction between attitude and objective news presentation suggested an area of enquiry concerning gender stereotypes and reporting. Gans[6], in a study of the national news media, contends that reporters act more often than not on the basis of "reality judgments," or stereotypes comfortable and accessible both to themselves and to the perceived audience. Does the stereotyping which has been found at the gatekeeping levels filter down to the reporter's consciousness, or do reporters successfully avoid such influence of bias and strive for objectivity, as the findings of Drew or those of Kerrick, Anderson, and Swales would suggest?

If male and female news reporters were given identical information concerning a source, with the exception that for half of the reporters the source was female and for the other half male, would the resulting stories adhere more closely to the findings of Davis and Foreit, et al. and exhibit differential treatment of the source, or would the reporters override stereotypes and personal attitudes in an attempt to present a balance story? In other words, working from material identical save for gender of source, will the reporters

write stories which vary with gender of the source?

It was hypothesized, first, that stories written about a female source would have more personal and feminine information than stories written about a male source, even if all the information available to the reporter is identical.

Also, we hypothesized that these differences would hold for both male and female reporters.

We also predicted that female reporters would use more personal information than male reporters, regardless of source gender.

No predictions were made regarding an interaction effect between reporter and source gender.

METHOD

Subjects. Subjects were graduate and undergradute newswriting students at Syracuse University. They were enrolled in an advanced undergraduate newswriting, beginning graduate newswriting and advanced graduate newswriting classes. There were 12 males and 18 females for a total of 30 subjects.

The diagram below shows the composition of the treatment groups.

SOURCE

REPORTER	Male	Female	
Male	6	6	12
Female	8	10	18
	14	16	

Design. A 2x2 independent measure factorial design was used, varying gender of the source and using male and female students as reporters. News story content, the dependent variable, was defined as the ratio of professional to personal assertions, and the ratio of pre-determined masculine, feminine and neutral assertions made by the reporter.

Subjects were also measured on the basis of an interpersonal judgment scale[7] in order to assess their feeling toward the source.

The subjects were given a packet containing a press conference transcript, a biography and a xeroxed copy of a page of handwritten reporter's notes. They were told to write an article based only on the materials they were given.

The materials, detailing the appointment of a new superintendent for Syracuse public schools, were identical, except for the names and gender of the speaker. In 14 cases, the superintendent was David Chandler; in 16 cases, it was Elizabeth Tomkins Chandler. Gender references were changed where

appropriate.

The biography sketched the education, experience, and personal aspects of Chandler. The transcript, ostensibly of a news conference held earlier, dealt primarily with Chandler's views on issues related to education. These included sports, discipline, special education, free lunches and merit pay. In all, there were nine topics.

The experimenters predetermined that certain topics were traditionally masculine, such as sports and discipline. Special education, free lunches and sex education were considered feminine. Merit pay and mediocrity in the schools were considered neutral.

The order of topics was randomly chosen. The reporter's notes contained brief descriptions of Chandler and his/her mannerisms.

Independent Variables. Source gender was manipulated by changing the name of the news source from David Chandler to Elizabeth Tomkins Chandler. The information packet about the source was identical in every other respect. The student reporter's gender constituted the second independent variable.

Dependent Variables. Facts concerning the source were selected to represent either personal or professional attributes for the distributed information packets. Examples of a professional attribute were educational training, previous positions held, membership on the Governor's Commission on Education, and position on various issues. Examples of personal attributes included marital status, references to family, personal descriptions (e.g., height, hair color), and hobbies.

The press conference transcript, source biography, and a page of reporters

'notes' comprised the information packet. The press conference transcript contained 18 question-response items. Six of these items consisted of an introductory question, questions related specifically to the source's appointment, and a question about family and the move to Syracuse. Of the remaining 12 questions, four were classified as masculine in question topic and source response, four were similarly classifed as feminine, and the remaining four classified as neutral.

Broverman, Vogel, Broverman, Clarkson, and Rosenkrantz[8] found that among college men and women, traits associated with male sex roles formed a "competence cluster" with logic, aggressiveness, independence, competiveness, and leadership as elements of the cluster. The present study considered the masculine stereotype to contain attributes of toughness, concern for order and discipline, and hardened professionalism. An example of a masculine issue concerned the use of the drugs in the schools. The manufactured response was of the preemptive tone that "the use of illicit drugs is intolerable. A drug transaction that happens on a school playground should be handled no differently than one that happens on a street corner."

The feminine stereotype questions and responses, on the other hand, contained attibutes of nurturing, caring, and more holistic attitudes toward the individual. This view corresponds with the "warmth-expressiveness cluster" measured by Broverman et al., which includes desirable feminine traits such as tact, awareness of the feelings of others, and the ease of expressing tender feelings. An example of a feminine issue addressed the need for hot meal programs and their cost-effectiveness for the system. The response was,

in part: "You can't build a full mind on an empty stomach.... As the (mother/father) of two children, I know proper nutrition is vital to the learning process."

A representative gender-neutral question was on the Reagan tuition tax credit. The response was based on fiscal considerations and concern for the diversity of the student population.

The dependent variables were measured from the news story produced from the information packets. Levels of assertions measured were personal or professional, with each examined for masculine, feminine, or neutral assertions. Each story was content analyzed with individual assertions as the unit of analysis. An assertion was operationally defined as a complete thought; therefore, a single sentence could contain multiple assertions. An example from one story indicated the assertion count used in the study:

> When asked how schools [1] should deal with the issue of sex, Chandler replied, 'Education should [2] work together with parents to [3] teach children responsibility and [4] respect for their bodies.'

Assertion 1 covers the question, assertion 2 indicates the thought that the educational establishment should cooperate with parents, assertion 3 indicates that children should be taught responsibility, and assertion 4 indicates that children should be taught respect for their bodies. The particular question, that of sex education, was coded as feminine for purposes of analysis.

A posttest questionnaire on the subjects' impressions of the source served as an affect validity check. The questionnaire was a modification of Byrne's

Interpersonal Judgment Scale, with seven scaled responses on aspects of the individual, including intelligence, knowledge of education issues, morality, and subject's personal feeling toward the source. An additional question asked the subject to agree or disagree with the following statement: "A woman is just as qualified as a man to be Superintendent of Syracuse Public Schools." A final item asked subjects to rank in importance the transcript, biography, and reporter's notes for their preparation of the stories.

Procedures. Prior to the experiment, subjects were randomly assigned to one of two source conditions, with half of the male students assigned to the male-source condition. Female subjects were randomly assigned in similar fashion.

The experiment was conducted during class times in the regular classrooms. The course instructor conducted the experiment as part of the regular classroom activity, but he was not aware of the content of the packets nor of the specific experimental hypotheses.

At the beginning of the experiment, the instructor told the subjects they were going to have a class exercise to assess how well they organized information. He reminded them that it was not uncommon for a reporter at a newspaper to be given information collected by someone else and then to be asked to write a story about it.

The instructor told the subjects that he would be looking for three things in their news stories: a strong lead, a good description of the main character, and a clear idea of the substance of the press conference.

He told the students to assume that all the information was correct and

that it was the only information they would have. He asked them not to speak to anyone else in the class ("Consider all the other people in the class as reporters on the competing newspaper."). If the subjects had any questions, they were to raise their hands and the instructor would come to their desks.

The subjects were given one hour and 15 minutes to complete the exercise. If they finished early, they were asked to remain seated and quiet.

After the class completed the news stories, the instructor handed each student the questionnaire which included the four standard measures of attraction and the question assessing the subjects' feelings about the suitability of a women for the position of superintendent of public schools.

Subjects were also asked to rate the relative importance of the materials in writing the news stories. Subjects were then debriefed after the experiment.

Content Analysis. Content analysis of the stories was carried out in three stages. First, assertions were marked in the stories where each occurred. With the entire sentence as context unit, assertions were units of anlaysis. After the story had been labeled for assertions, the coder went through each story a second time, counting each assertion, as either a personal or professonal assertion. These two categories were then examined for the number of assertions within each which could be coded as masculine, feminine, or neutral according to the predetermined categorizations. The final result of the content analysis yielded main divisions of personal/professional assertions, as well as feminine, masculine, and neutral assertions.

To account for differences in length of stories written, a proportional

measure was used which took the number of assertions in each category divided by the total number of assertions coded for the story. The resulting ratios for each subject enabled a fair comparison of masculine, feminine, and neutral assertions in each of the stories.

Inter-coder reliability. Coders used Holsti's "coefficient of reliablity" to measure inter-coder reliability.[9] Each of the four coders coded the same subject's story before the content analysis began, and all coded an additional story at the end of the analysis to check coder reliability. For the four coders in this study, the inter-coder reliability for identifying assertions was 90.6%. For identifying personal/professional assertions, the reliability percentage was 88.6%, and for identifying assertions as masculine, feminine, or neutral, the reliability was 89.1%. The average inter-coder reliability across these three measures was 89.4%.

RESULTS

The SAS general linear model[10] was used to analyze the data to take into account the unbalanced cell sizes.

This study had hypothesized that stories about a female source would contain more personal and feminine assertions than stories written about a male source. The obtained difference in the amount of personal assertions in news stories written about the male versus the female source was not significant, using the standard criterion of $p < .05$, $F(3,26) = 3.73$, $p = .06$.

A main effect was found on the number of feminine assertions included $F(3,26) = 10.03$, $p = .003$, with the female source not surprisingly being

described with more feminine assertions than the male source by both male and female reporters. The number of masculine assertions applied to the female source did not differ significantly from that of the male source.

No interaction effect was found between reporter gender and source gender on all dependent measures.

The scores on the attitude measures did not differ from the male and female source, with both eliciting positive evaluations from male and female reporters. Although not a significant difference, David Chandler was "liked" slightly better than Elizabeth Chandler (1.2 versus 1.8, respectively, on a 7-point scale, with 1 = "I feel that I would probably like this person very much.").

On the statement that a women was just as qualified as a man to be superintendent of public schools, there was no difference on the extent of agreement between male and female reporters (mean scores were 4.63 for the male and 4.83 for the female source, with 1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree).

Mean ratios for personal versus professional and for masculine, feminine, and neutral assertions were examined to identify any patterns in the coverage.

Table 1 About Here

As Table 1 shows, fewer personal assertions were used by male reporters than female reporters, and for both groups of reporters, more of these personal assertions were applied to the female than to the male source. It should be noted that given the absence of the significant interaction effect, these patterns are meant to be suggestive.

Table 2 also shows the same pattern: more masculine assertions appear to be applied by male reporters than feminine assertions, for both male and female sources, while female reporters seem to be a bit more balanced for the male source. For the female source, slightly more feminine assertions are used by female reporters.

Table 2 About Here

DISCUSSION

In looking at the results of this experiment, it is vital to keep in mind the small size of the treatment groups. Labovitz[11] pointed to an inverse relationship between the number of subjects and the significance level. Whereas in a large group, significance may be obtained with only small differences in the man scores, the opposite is true for small groups.

It is the experimenters' feeling that the mean ratios for personal/professional assertions ($p = .06$) represent an important difference.

The results show that male and female reporters were likely to include more personal assertions when writing about "Elizabeth." This is in keeping with research cited earlier and with the pessimistic expectation that gender stereotypes die hard: describing a female source on the same professional terms as a male source is still wishful thinking. It is easier, it seems, to ascribe personal descriptions to her.

Mean ratios for news story content did not differ significantly by gender of the reporter. However, as table 2 shows, an interesting pattern is manifested with male reporters consistently including more masculine assertions, regardless of the gender of the source.

This may be due to the male reporter's judgment about what is most important. If he feels that sports in the school and stricter classrooms are more important than mainstreaming handicapped children, then he is more likely to include them in story.

Female reporters were relatively evenhanded for the male source, including a like number of masculine and feminine assertions. They used slightly more feminine assertions, however, for the female source.

We expected that socialization of women causes a heavier reliance on personal factors in describing and "fleshing out" other people. The results showed this not be the case, leaving one hard-pressed to decide whether one should be relieved that female reporters are not more prone to stereotyping than their male counterparts, or to wring one's hands over their lack of evenhandedness in covering members of their own sex.

The same pattern held for feminine assertions. On the professional level,

the issues which reporters writing about Elizabeth were more likely to highlight were those relating to more "feminine" topics such as teen-age pregnancy and school lunches while David tended to be presented more often with the issues of being tough with the teachers' union and drugs in school.

We expected similar responses on the questionnaire on the question of whether a women was qualified to be superintendent, due to demand characteristics. The news stories, indicates how deeply subconscious the gender bias is in newswriting.

While subjects across the board agreed on the suitability of a woman for the position of school superintendent, they were hard-pressed to assign the same characteristics to the female as they did to the male.

Below are two sentences taken from news stories that were written during the experiment. They were both written by male subjects. Taken in combination, they do a nice job of show how identical information can be presented in such a way as to change the reader's perception of the source:

> "Fielding questions with aplomb, the 34-year-old, slightly build (David) Chandler declined to comment."
>
> "Mrs. Chandler, with brown hair and brown eyes, and a slim, maybe even frail build, showed herself to be tougher than she looks."

In the first sentence, Chandler is confident and masterful. In the second, "Mrs." Chandler is made to seem almost anemic -- but surprisingly able to survive.

Aside from the "Mrs." (Elizabeth at not time was ever referred to as Mrs.

in any of the materials provided the subjects.), the sentences are indicative of the differences we found in a qualitative look at the news stories written during the experiment.

Thus it would appear that while the writers gave an even hand to their presentation of the "facts" of the news a conference, gender bias was active in their final stories. Personal and feminine references were more apparent in the stories about the female source, a fact which is open to different interpretation and worthy of further research.

A future experiment using more subjects could elaborate on this study and clarify the differences that seem to be almost inherent in the way male and female reporters react to male and female sources. This study's major contribution lies in the fact that it allows researchers to demonstrate gender bias in newswriting (apart from other editors' influences) as a direct result of the gender of the source.

Throughout this report the underlying assumption has been gender bias in newswriting is unacceptable. A question for further thought and research is: In which direction should bias be reducted?

Would it be better for the pages of the newspaper to eliminate all non-essential personal references as suggested by Rivers[12]? As he suggests, "Gratuitous physical descriptions, uncommon almost to the point of absence in news stories about men, should also be eliminated from such stories about women." The effect of this may be to further remove public figures from the everyday realities of readers. Or is it more realistic to "humanize" sources in a more even-handed fashion? Why should we be any more reluctant to show

men in more nurturing, caring roles? On the other hand, inclusion of personal descriptions of males might be looked upon as lewdness or ridicule.

Whatever the answer, newspapers and journalism schools should begin to ask themselves whether it is part of their duty to overcome these differences. And, if the answer is yes, how?

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Table 1

Mean Ratios of Masculine and Femine Assertions, by Gender of Source and Reporter

		SOURCE	
		Male	Female
REPORTER			
Male	Masc.	.13	.15
	Fem.	.09	.16
Female	Masc.	.14	.12
	Fem.	.07	.16
$\bar{X}$ =	Masc.	.13	.12
	Fem.	.08	.16

$F(3,26) = 10.03$, $p = .003$

Table 2

Mean Ratios of Personal and Professional Assertions, by Gender of Source and Reporter

		SOURCE: Male		SOURCE: Female	
REPORTER: Male		Pers.	.13	Pers.	.20
		Prof.	.87	Prof.	.80
Female		Pers.	.20	Pers.	.25
		Prof.	.81	Prof.	.75
$\bar{X}$ =		Pers.	.17	Pers.	.23
		Prof.	.83	Prof.	.77

$F(3,26) = 3.43$, $p = .08$